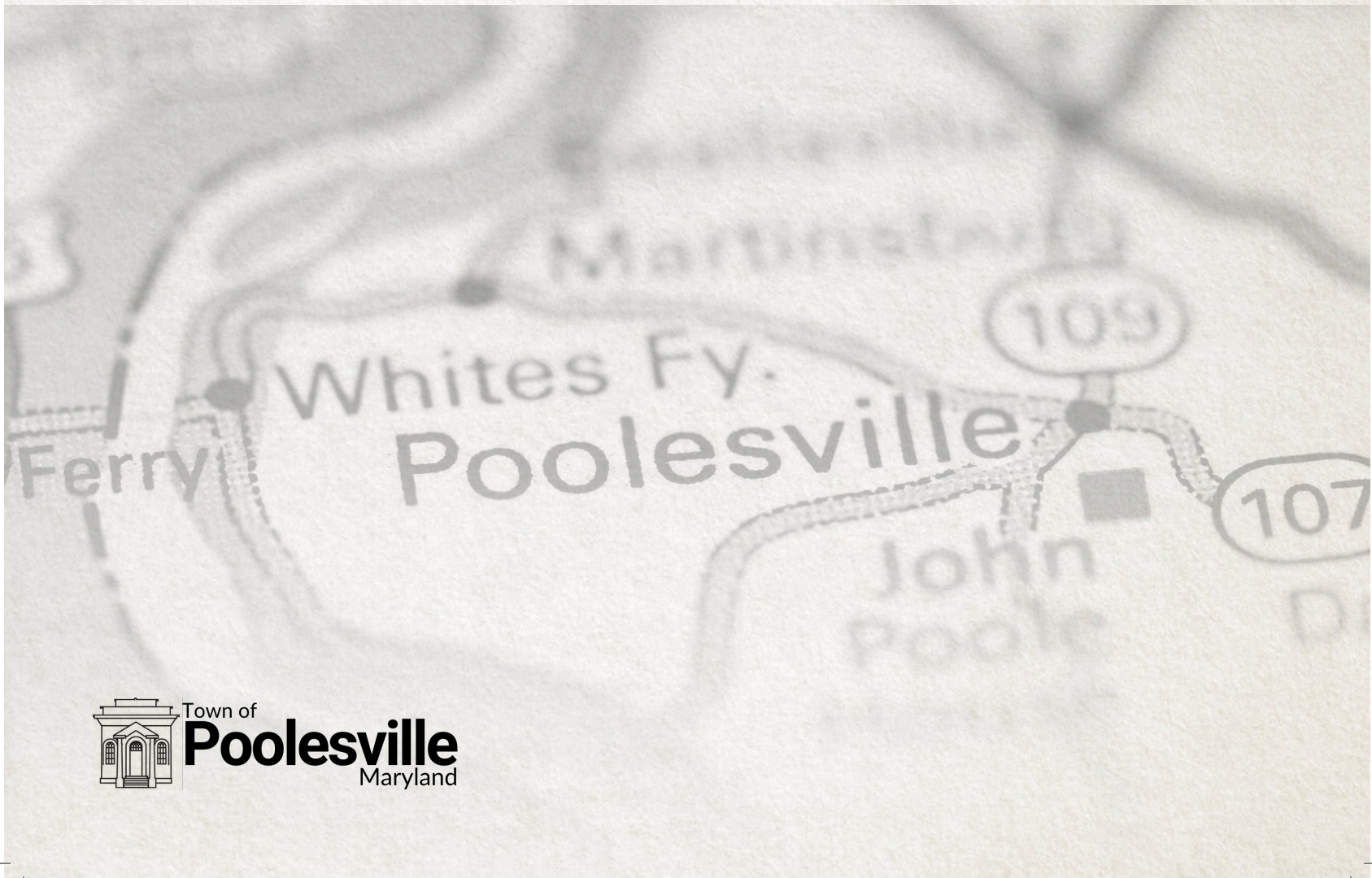


## FAIR ACCESS

FOR WESTERN MONTGOMERY COUNTY

- ★ ALL NEW POOLESVILLE HIGH SCHOOL
- ★ COLLOCATED COMMUNITY SERVICES CENTER

# WHITE PAPER ON THE **ECONOMY OF WESTERN MONTGOMERY COUNTY**



Town of  
**Poolesville**  
Maryland

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	03
INTRODUCTION AND THESIS	05
THE ORIGINS OF THE AGRICULTURAL RESERVE	06
HEALTH CARE, POVERTY, AND ACCESS TO MEDICAL SERVICES	08
CURRENT MASTER PLAN – THRIVE 2050	09
THE “HUB AND SPOKE” ECONOMY OF WESTERN MONTGOMERY COUNTY	11
OVERVIEW OF WESTERN MONTGOMERY COUNTY’S ATTRACTIONS	12
THE ECONOMIC EVIDENCE SUPPORTING THE “HUB AND SPOKE” MODEL	15
THE UNIQUE ROLE OF WHITE’S FERRY	18
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	20
ARTS AND PERFORMING ARTS CENTER	21
SOURCES	23
APPENDIX	24





## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- **Western Montgomery County’s economic, business and social structures simply do not fit the metrics often used in the rest of the more populated, suburban/urban Montgomery County to decide public policy and budget issues. The area, which incorporates the bulk of the Agricultural Reserve, is a rural oasis in the midst of large areas of population concentration down-county where more urban-style problems exist.**
- Western Montgomery County’s economy is not based on large corporate investments and operations, large chain stores, major high-rise and housing development, or large government facilities, as is the case in much of the densely populated, down-county areas. Instead, the “hub” of the Town of Poolesville is anchored to the collective operation and success of the many “spokes” scattered throughout the rural landscape or located in the Town of Poolesville in the form of small, often family-owned local businesses, artists and craftsman, restaurants, farms, vegetable and fruit markets, wineries, breweries, historic sites, and outdoor recreation or park locations.
- Agriculture is at the heart of the Agricultural Reserve’s economic foundations. However, many businesses and citizens in Western Montgomery County are not involved in farming. In order for all who call the area home to have a chance to thrive, those who envisioned it knew it would have to incorporate a range of other activities that rely on rural and open spaces for their success to spur prosperity as broadly as possible. Both the 1964 Wedges and Corridors General Plan that led to the adoption of the Agricultural Reserve in 1981, and the Thrive 2050 master plan, the first update to the 1964 Wedges and Corridors General Plan in nearly 60 years, note that the Agricultural Reserve includes not only farming, but also a vast array of historical sites, outdoor recreation areas, and more recently wineries, breweries, and vegetable and fruit markets.
- **Thrive 2050 explicitly notes the importance of tourism for the Agricultural Reserve.** “Awareness of - and access to - the Agricultural Reserve should be improved by providing ways for people throughout the county to experience and take full advantage of this unique resource. Our residents and visitors should not miss out on opportunities to learn about the county’s rural heritage, eat and drink locally produced food and beverages, and participate in outdoor activities such as hiking, biking, camping, and fishing.”
- **Despite the amazing breadth of assets throughout Western Montgomery County and the findings of both the 1964 Wedges and Corridors General Plan and the Thrive 2050 master plan, the County Government has done very little to develop solid and informative data on the entirety of the Western Montgomery County economy, particularly how small businesses and tourism contribute to economic vibrancy. The county does have extensive information regarding the economic health and contributions of the agricultural sector in the Agricultural Reserve, which is vital and important.**
- Information compiled in this report, while not comprehensive, suggests that tourism-based activities generate a great deal of economic activity beyond agriculture alone in Western Montgomery County and Agricultural Reserve. One study suggests that the economic impact of the promotional and grant-making activities of Heritage Montgomery alone totaled **\$376.1 million annually**. More than **\$50 million** was generated in state and local taxes, and all of this activity supported some **5,300 jobs**, according to the study.
- **Other economic data suggests that spending on tourism throughout the Agricultural Reserve generates indirect economic impacts, meaning that dollars spent on a visit in one location often generate revenue in other areas of the local economy.**



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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### BASED ON OUR RESEARCH, WE MAKE THE FOLLOWING RECOMMENDATIONS:

**01** The Town of Poolesville serves as the vital “hub” for Western Montgomery County’s many “spokes,” and the county should treat it as an equal partner in promoting and adopting policies and programs to enhance the economy of the area.

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**02** The “hub” — the Town of Poolesville — can help support more visitors to Western Montgomery County by ensuring that the town has the facilities and programs that other areas in the county enjoy. Needed improvements include:

- A new community center with clinic space to provide needed health care services near where Western Montgomery County residents live; and
  - Enclosing the swimming pool so it becomes a year-round facility that can hold competitions and events, practices, provide recreational opportunities, and help those who are recovering from injuries or are aging to improve their health.
- 

**03** Continue improving the “spokes” in Western Montgomery County, like the recently opened Crossvines grape crushing facility, restaurant, and events venue, including:

- Reopening and investing in White’s Ferry so it can handle more traffic and become a more attractive historic site as well as a commuter link;
- Devoting more resources and effort via Visit Montgomery and Heritage Montgomery to identify more tourism opportunities;
- Promote the “spokes” in and around the Town of Poolesville, including the possibility of building a museum devoted to the history of ferries at White’s Ferry and the construction of a performing arts complex in the “Historic West End” of town; and
- More research needs to be done so we can understand how best to improve the Western Montgomery County economy and drive tourism.

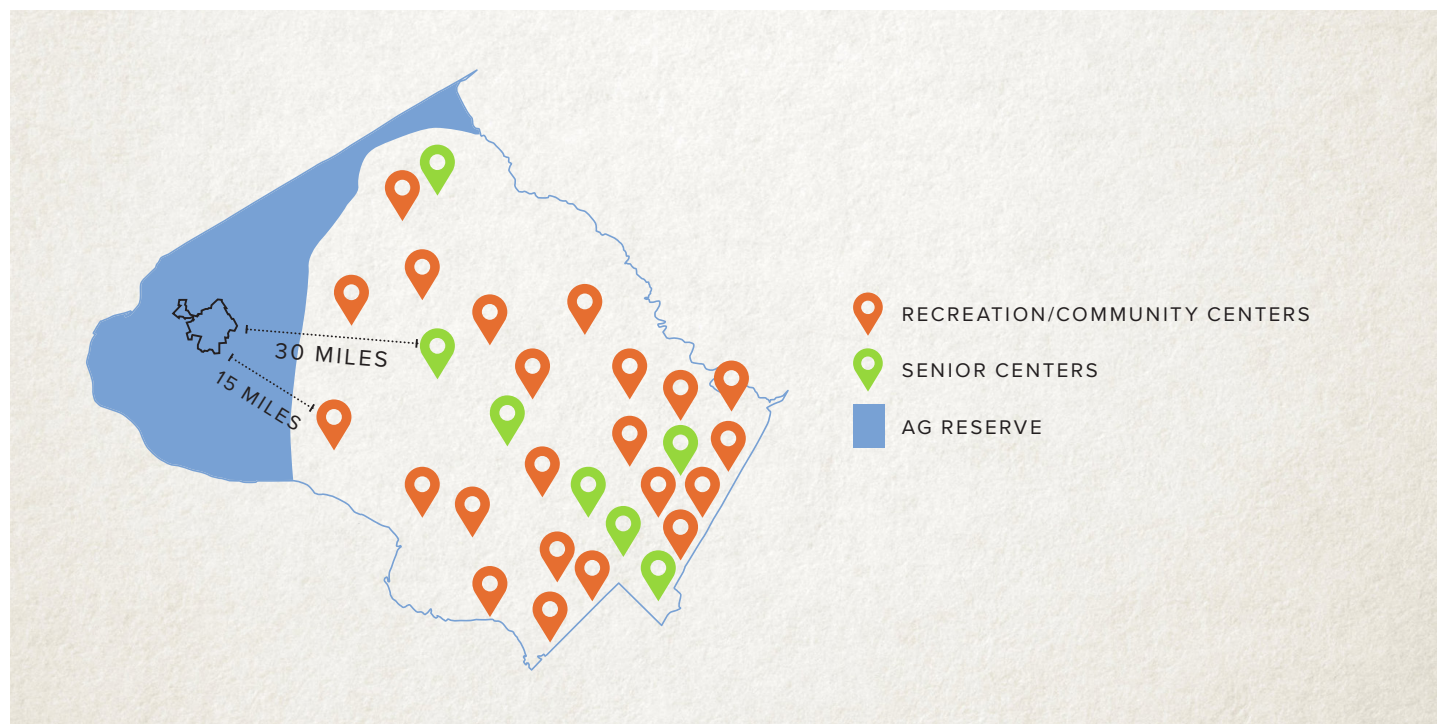


## INTRODUCTION AND THESIS

Western Montgomery County's economic, business and social structures simply do not fit the metrics often used in the rest of the much more populated, suburban/urban Montgomery County to decide public policy and budget issues. The area is a rural oasis in the midst of large areas of population concentration down-county, where more urban-style problems exist. This rural area of 93,000 acres called the Agricultural Reserve was created by policies adopted by Montgomery County that prohibited large-scale development, did not allow sewer lines to be extended to the Agricultural Reserve, and created special transfer rights that provided incentives to preserve rural land and develop areas in the more densely populated down-county areas. The bulk of the Agricultural Reserve is encompassed by Western Montgomery County, which is coterminous with the new County Council District 2.

Western Montgomery County's economy is not based on large corporate investments and operations, large chain stores, major high-rise and housing development, or large government facilities, as is the case in much of the densely populated down-county areas. Instead, the "hub" of the Town of Poolesville is anchored to the collective operation and success of the many "spokes" scattered throughout the rural landscape or located in the Town of Poolesville in the form of small, often family-owned local businesses, restaurants, farms, vegetable and fruit markets, wineries, breweries, historic sites, and outdoor recreation or park locations.

All of these "spokes" attract visitors from many areas who are interested in everything from buying fresh, locally grown vegetables to visiting historical sites to hiking, biking, or watching wildlife. Western Montgomery County already has many elements for economic success, but it can truly become an even more robust center of growth and vitality for the entire county based on tourism, outdoor activities, outdoor entertainment, and leisure, as well as agriculture.



## THE ORIGINS OF THE AGRICULTURAL RESERVE

While many know of or have visited the Agricultural Reserve, far fewer likely know its history, it is commonly understood to have been created in part to help preserve large areas of land that could support farming and other related activities, such as harvesting wood. Policies that formed the Agricultural Reserve prohibited large developments or the construction of major buildings or shopping centers through a complex series of zoning policies.

While agriculture is at the heart of the Agricultural Reserve's economic foundations, those who envisioned it realized very early on that its viability would have to include a range of other activities that rely on rural and open spaces. To quote the 1964 Wedges and Corridors General Plan developed by the predecessor to today's Maryland National Capital Parks and Planning Commission (MNCPPC) that led eventually to the creation of the Agricultural Reserve:

**"The many different land uses appropriate in rural areas usually have two things in common: they require large amounts of land, and they are directly related to natural resources. Therefore, the well-being and stability of rural uses depend upon the conservation and proper development of natural resources."**

The report goes on to note that in addition to agriculture, outdoor activities and parks are natural and important parts of what would eventually make the Agricultural Reserve thrive. It quotes a study by the U.S. Department of Agriculture on this point:

"The Department of Agriculture's program includes measures to strengthen family farms but recognizes that 'probably the most promising potential source of new economic opportunities in many rural areas is to be found in providing commercial enterprises, and various services connected with outdoor recreation and tourism.' This is especially applicable to rural areas lying at the edges of major cities. **Rural income protection and expansion is a basic goal of the Department of Agriculture and, likewise, should be a basic goal of the public authorities in the Regional District (i.e., the name used in the report to refer to the yet-to-be-created Agricultural Reserve).**

Success in reaching this goal means success in promoting a healthy rural environment for the open space wedges recommended in this General Plan."

Even in the very early formative stages of the Agricultural Reserve's creation, it was recognized that "Rural Income Protection" (the term used in the report) was an important goal of the policies that would shape the Agricultural Reserve. The phrase acknowledges that the economy of rural areas is different and, in order to remain vibrant, requires different policies and programs from those used in urbanized areas. It was also clearly recognized that while farming and agricultural pursuits were vital aspects of the Agricultural Reserve's success, it was also very important to support and promote other activities that rely on open spaces and natural environments, **including recreation and tourism.**

At the time Agricultural Reserve policies were being considered, some raised concerns that the sparse population in the area (only about 12,000 to 15,000 people live in the entire Agricultural Reserve) and large expanses of farm and forest lands might lead policymakers to forget about and ignore the needs of those in the area. The more than one million people who live mostly in down county urbanized areas are more visible, and their problems may seem more pressing. Since the county and state have almost no presence in Western Montgomery County (other than the schools in the area), county departments and employees do not regularly come to the area to understand its needs. As an editorial in the Washington Post authored by leaders in the Fair Access Committee put it in 2018:

**"Nearly a third of western Montgomery County — the Agricultural Reserve — is protected from development under proposals made in the 1960s. The resulting 93,000 acres of green farms and forests is a thing of beauty, a respite for many, and a significant economic and environmental asset. There is a dark side to it, however, and many of the 15,000 residents who live here suffer the consequences. For decades, the county has neglected to invest in the people and students who live or attend high school in the western part of the county."**

## THE ORIGINS OF THE AGRICULTURAL RESERVE

Preserving land by prohibiting or constraining development should not mean that the county and state fail to invest in the needs of the citizens of Western Montgomery County. As the planners who shaped the Agricultural Reserve in 1964 understood all too well, not only could it happen, but it did.

The county tried for many years to take away the few county resources that existed in Western Montgomery County. Citizens had to fight for decades just to keep Poolesville High School open. Efforts were made by the county to close Poolesville High School beginning in the 1950s. Those efforts did not end until the Global Ecology Program was formed at the high school by a Poolesville High School teacher in the 1980s. The county also tried to close Monocacy Elementary School during that time.



In 2018, citizens and the Town of Poolesville came together to fight back against the neglect and lack of equity in services that has plagued Western Montgomery County for decades. They established the Fair Access Committee, and its first move was to develop a white paper (**Framework for a Multi-Use Facility With a New High School in Western Montgomery County**) that spelled out a vision for the Town of Poolesville and the broader county starting with the rebuilding and modernization of Poolesville High School. The

schools serving Western Montgomery County are central to the community, but the area also lacks access to community and social services available elsewhere in the county, like a community center. Following county policy, the Fair Access Committee proposed a community center that would be collocated with the new high school. This would save money but also reduce the footprint of county facilities, making our approach a much better fit with the Agricultural Reserve. This novel approach not only got the attention of county leaders but also gained the enthusiastic support of then-county schools superintendent Jack Smith.

The county makes virtually no recreation programs available to Western Montgomery County residents, in large part because it has no facilities in which to offer programs like mentoring, after-school art programs, exercise and physical fitness programs, a variety of programs for seniors, and recreational sports and games of various kinds for teens. In its 2010-2030 facilities planning report, the Recreation Department acknowledges this problem:

**“Long-term planning efforts should address the Poolesville/ Western County area because it has few facilities even though population numbers may not indicate it is warranted.”**

Not only does this comment acknowledge the need for county facilities to offer recreation and community programs of various kinds, it once again points to the unique situation in the Western Montgomery County due to its rural nature, small population and distance from other facilities.

The white paper laid out a compelling, fact-based vision for needed facilities and county investments in Western Montgomery County. But it also made the case that Western Montgomery County, which encompasses a large portion of the Agricultural Reserve, must be seen as a vital part of the county and not just an idyllic and much-loved place of open spaces and farms. It is a place where nearly 15,000 county residents live, far from most of the services available to other Montgomery County residents. The Agricultural Reserve can't thrive if many of those who live here can't live a healthy life and take advantage of the many benefits of living in Montgomery County.



## HEALTH CARE, POVERTY, AND ACCESS TO MEDICAL SERVICES

Distance, isolation, hidden need, and lack of population define many of the challenges for those living in Western Montgomery County. Approximately 2,500 aging adults (people over 60) live in Western Montgomery County. In terms of poverty, the statistics are hard to compile from the Census data. However, the county has compiled what it calls an “Equity Focus Map.” That map shows that in the Census tract that encompasses the Dickerson and Barnesville zip codes, 28 percent of the households are considered “low income.” In the Census tract that encompasses the entire Town of Poolesville zip code, more than 17 percent of households are considered “low income.” While the Town of Poolesville itself has a high median income (which often is cited as evidence that Western Montgomery County does not have as many social problems as in other parts of the county), there are clearly many pockets of poverty in Western Montgomery County.

Most in Western Montgomery County are at least 10 miles, and many much further than that, from access to a senior center, community center, medical facilities, specialists of any kind, or even grocery stores. The local charitable services organization Western Upper Montgomery County (WUMCO) Help serves those in need in the area. Based on WUMCO’s data serving clients who have no means of visiting doctors or medical services conveniently and regularly, it is likely that a significant number of older citizens in the Agricultural Reserve live alone, is chronically ill, have mental health illnesses, and cannot drive either because they cannot afford a car, or their medical condition forbids it.

Without the ability to drive, getting to see the medical specialists so many WUMCO clients need to visit is very difficult. The county bus service only runs to the Town of Poolesville, and it does not extend to other areas like Dickerson, Barnesville, or Beallsville. The existing bus line runs along a route that takes it to the Metro in Gaithersburg. The bus does not stop in Germantown or Rockville, where many doctors have offices. WMATA, which provides “call to schedule” pick-up and drop-off bus rides in many parts of the county, does not do so in Western Montgomery County.

The service only operates where a scheduled bus service exists, and in the entire Western Montgomery County, the only place that is served by a public bus is the Town of Poolesville.

The county health department recently found that of all 36 zip codes studied within the county, the Town of Poolesville zip code ranked last regarding overall health outcomes and on other health metrics such as emergency room visits. Heavy use of emergency rooms and mental health walk-in clinics can indicate that patients are unable to get to doctors for regular consults. Dr. Travis Gayles, the county’s former health officer, acknowledged that the lack of nearby and convenient medical services could be a contributing factor in this situation.

The Town of Poolesville has two local primary care physicians serving Western Montgomery County. The ratio of primary care doctors to patients is about 1 to 7,500 in Western Montgomery County and about 1 to 740 for the rest of the county. While some of those served by WUMCO do visit the local doctors, there are simply too many of these clients to be given care by these two physicians.





## CURRENT MASTER PLAN - THRIVE 2050

Montgomery County just adopted a new master plan called Thrive 2050. It is a direct successor to the 1964 Wedges and Corridors Plan General Plan. As the first update to the plan in nearly 60 years, it includes a section about the Agricultural Reserve.

Thrive 2050 notes that the Agricultural Reserve includes not only farming but a vast array of historical sites, outdoor recreation areas, wineries, breweries, and vegetable and fruit markets. It then goes on to make this statement regarding the importance of these many attractions:

**“The Wedges and Corridors plan did not fully articulate how the broader public should expect to benefit from maintaining a rural pattern over much of the county’s land area. The plan explained that land preservation is important to recreation, agriculture, and conservation of natural resources but did not describe how people living in urban parts of the county would access these opportunities. The result is that many people who live outside what became the Agricultural Reserve are unfamiliar with it and do not take full advantage of opportunities to visit, enjoy and develop an appreciation for the value of continued preservation of land for farming, recreation, and environmental stewardship. Awareness of - and access to - the Agricultural Reserve should be improved by providing ways for people throughout the county to experience and take full advantage of this unique resource. Our residents and visitors should not miss out on opportunities to learn about the county’s rural heritage, eat and drink locally produced food and beverages, and participate in outdoor activities such as hiking, biking, camping, and fishing.”**

It is clear that this statement is, in part, acknowledging that not enough has been done to promote the many attractions that lay within the Agricultural Reserve. It also points to how actively encouraging and enticing people to visit these many sites, parks, and businesses benefits the economy of the entire county and, most importantly, the residents of the Agricultural Reserve who live in Western Montgomery County.

The report goes on to make recommendations concerning the Agricultural Reserve, designed not only to preserve it but to help it remain healthy and vibrant for all of its residents:

**“(The county should) Maximize the benefits of the Agricultural Reserve through policies designed to ensure the continued viability of farming as an economically productive and sustainable activity, discourage sprawl, facilitate a broad range of outdoor recreation and tourism activities, conserve land and natural resources, and promote practices that advance environmental quality. . . While farming should remain the primary use in the Agricultural Reserve, the area set aside for the rural pattern also provides opportunities for recreation, tourism, and natural resource conservation, uses that must be acknowledged and supported. The Agricultural Reserve improves the attractiveness and livability of the county because it provides opportunities for locally grown food, outdoor recreation, education, and tourism. The continued preservation of the Agricultural Reserve, along with the county’s park system, also protects the county’s forests, wetlands, meadows, and streams, supports biodiversity and natural habitats, and protects watersheds, aquifers, and water quality.”**





The report contains a number of measures that can be used to assess the success of its policy recommendations regarding the Agricultural Reserve:

- Total acres of farmland, natural habitats, forests, and environmentally sensitive areas protected
- Economic productivity of farming
- Amount of space for outdoor recreation and variety of activities supported
- **Number of visitors from outside the Agricultural Reserve for recreation, commerce, and tourism**

In order to show increases in the number of visitors from outside the Agricultural Reserve for “recreation, commerce, and tourism,” the county will need to do a better job of promoting the benefits of visiting and spending time in the Agricultural Reserve. The more visitors who come to Western Montgomery County, the better the economy and the more the “hub and spokes” that support its citizens will thrive.

## THE “HUB AND SPOKE” ECONOMY OF WESTERN MONTGOMERY COUNTY

As the 1964 Wedges and Corridors General Plan that led to the Agricultural Reserve’s creation and the newly adopted Thrive 2050 master plan make clear, the Agricultural Reserve’s health and vibrancy depend not only on agriculture but also on tourism and visitors coming to see the many historic sites, sample the farm markets, hike, bike, and canoe, dine at unique family or locally owned restaurants, and relax at wineries and breweries. Western Montgomery County and the broader Agricultural Reserve include all of these attractions and more, as are detailed below. The benefits to Montgomery County and, indeed, the entire DMV include:

- Its role as a heat and carbon sink and an environmental asset for the region;
- The production and access to fresh food and a thriving farm economy;
- Its role as a playground and outdoor wonderland for the entire DMV with a wide range of attraction; and
- The preservation of rural cultural and agricultural history and heritage.

Given all of these benefits, it is vital that the rural economy of Western Montgomery County remains protected and enhanced through appropriate policies and programs.

The many improvements and investments needed in the area, from reconstructing the nearly 100-year-old high school to a new community center and a year-round pool, are all part of a broader vision that supports a diverse, thriving, and economically viable rural Western Montgomery County. The “hub” of the Town of Poolesville provides support for this vision by offering access to a modern, state-of-the-art high school, a new community center, health care services, and a year-round swimming pool. It also includes many historical sites and Whelan Commons, an open green space for the town with a bandstand that is the site for year-round entertainment.

The many “spokes” around the Town of Poolesville in Western Montgomery County include a rich array of historical sites of interest, particularly African American communities, many of which blossomed around the Town of Poolesville right after the Civil War, wineries including the new Grape Crush facility, breweries, farms and orchards, and outdoor recreation opportunities such as at White’s Ferry and the C&O Canal, as well as Sugarloaf Mountain among other places. All of them benefit from having a vibrant center in the Town of Poolesville. The broader county benefits from all of this economic activity helping Montgomery County thrive.

As the “hub” of the Town of Poolesville improves and offers more services and programs like those available in the rest of the county, helping to attract visitors, and as more “spokes” like Crossvines emerge in Western Montgomery County, a virtuous cycle takes shape. The “hub and spokes” reinforce and support each other, benefitting from visitors while the number and range of visitors expand and increase. Western Montgomery County truly becomes a center of more sustainable growth and vitality for the entire county based on tourism, outdoor activities, outdoor entertainment, and leisure, with its base remaining firmly linked to agriculture and farming.





## OVERVIEW OF WESTERN MONTGOMERY COUNTY'S ATTRACTIONS

A listing of some of the many attractions in Western Montgomery County (excluding the many historic old houses throughout the area) illustrates the viability and importance of both the “hub and spoke” vision and the need to adopt a multi-faceted and active plan to attract more visitors to the area. An additional list of attractions in the area can be found in the Appendix at the end of the report.

HISTORICAL SITES		
Name	Location	Attraction
Sugarland Ethno-History Project	Dawsonville	African American History Site
John Poole House	Poolesville	Site of the Original House Built by the Founder of Poolesville
Warren Church	Martinsburg	African American History Site
Rosenwald School	Poolesville	Historic School Established by the Rosenwald Foundation for African American Children
Jonesville	Poolesville	African American History Site
Big Woods	Dickerson	African American History Site
Seneca School House	Poolesville	Original One Room School House
Old Bank Building	Poolesville	Original Building Constructed in 1906, Now Headquarters of Historic Medley District

FRESH FOOD FARM STANDS		
Lewis Orchard	Dickerson	Fresh Vegetables, Apples, Peaches, Other Fruits
Kingsbury's Orchard	Dickerson	Apple, Peaches, Other Fruits
Homestead Farm	Dawsonville	Fresh Vegetables, Pick Your Own Fruits
Deere Valley Farm - Opening Soon	Dickerson	Farm Produce, Meats
Savages Farm Market	Dickerson	Fresh Meats



## OVERVIEW OF WESTERN MONTGOMERY COUNTY'S ATTRACTIONS

OUTDOOR ENTERTAINMENT AND COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES		
C&O Canal	Runs from the southern edge of Montgomery County by White's Ferry and up to the northern border of the county	Hiking, Biking, Swimming, History, Boating
Sugarloaf Mountain	Dickerson	Hiking, Nature Watching, Panoramic Views
McKee-Besher Wildlife Preserve	Poolesville	Natural Swamps, One of the Largest Fields of Sunflowers in Maryland
White's Ferry	Dickerson	Last Operating Ferry on the Potomac River, Panoramic and Historical Drive
Whalen Commons	Poolesville	Community Events, Poolesville Day Main Area
Calleva	Dickerson	Summer Camps and Outdoor Learning Experiences for Kids
Riverworks	Beallsville	Art Programs, Educational Experiences

LOCAL FOOD, WINERIES AND BREWERIES		
Crossvines	Poolesville	Winery, Restaurant
Landmade	Poolesville	Brewery, Light Fare
Rocklands	Poolesville	Winery
Sugarloaf Winery	Comus	Winery
Wind Ridge	Poolesville	Winery
Locals	Poolesville	Local Foods, Bands



## OVERVIEW OF WESTERN MONTGOMERY COUNTY'S ATTRACTIONS

A look at the many events that occur annually in Western Montgomery County, including in the Town of Poolesville, hosted by organizations ranging from the Town of Poolesville to the Poolesville Seniors to the Historic Medley District and many others, also makes it clear that there is much to see and do in Western Montgomery County.

The Town of Poolesville alone sponsors dozens of events all summer on its town green of Whalen Commons, including Friday on the Commons events like “Red, White and Brews” and “Bark in the Park.” It also sponsors events with bands, brews, or wine and food like “Springfest” and “Wine Down in the Park.” Events for families are sponsored by the town, too, such as “Wet, Wacky and Wild,” a summer water-themed event.

In addition to these events, volunteers supported in part by a grant from the town manage the annual **Poolesville Day** celebration that attracts close to 10,000 people. Family and friends walk along Fisher Avenue to Whalen Commons and enjoy musical performances by top bands, arts and crafts vendors, food and beverages, kids’ activities, livestock displays, skateboarding demos, an old-style parade, an antique car show, and the largest electric vehicle show on the East Coast.

The town also sponsors a **Holiday Lighting Ceremony**. The entire Whalen Commons is covered with holiday light displays of various kinds. Santa comes to the Commons on the fire truck. Kiddie rides are offered, including a Santa train, and Santa arrives at his home to talk to the children. Food trucks, music, chainsaw ice cutting, and smores around the campfire are all available.

While this is an incredible list of events, keep in mind these are only those offered by the town. Many volunteer groups, such as artisan groups, Riverworks Art Center, Historic Medley District, Poolesville Seniors, and many others, offer events all year long. County-wide groups like Visit Montgomery also sponsor annual events in Western Montgomery County.

Despite the amazing breadth of assets throughout Western Montgomery County, from all that can be determined through our research, the County Government has done very little to develop solid, informative economic data on Western Montgomery County, particularly how small businesses and tourism contribute to economic vibrancy and how to enhance it. The county does have extensive information regarding the economic health and contributions of the agricultural sector in the Agricultural Reserve, which is vital and important. It does not have similar information on contributions made to the economy of Western Montgomery County due to tourism and visits to the many attractions listed above that are located in the area.

Fortunately, a number of organizations have pulled together useful information on various aspects of the tourism economy of Western Montgomery County. This information can be used to begin to form a picture of the true economic health of the Agricultural Reserve. Looking at this data, it becomes clear that tourism-based activities generate a great deal of economic activity beyond agriculture alone. This is not to belittle in any way the importance of farming, but as the creators of the Agricultural Reserve noted 60 years ago in the 1964 Wedges and Corridors General Plan, agriculture alone will not ensure the health and success of the Agricultural Reserve or the well-being of those living in it.





## THE ECONOMIC EVIDENCE SUPPORTING THE “HUB AND SPOKE” MODEL

Western Montgomery County’s economic model, due to its rural nature, open lands, forests, and sparse population, is far different from that of much of the rest of the county. Looking at news reports and media announcements, government studies, and even the strategic plan for the Montgomery County Economic Development Committee (MCEDC), it appears that much of the focus and resources spent by the county is used to attract and retain major biotech firms, research institutions, medical facilities, and government offices. Given the fact that the county generates nearly \$81 billion in economic activity annually, it seems Western Montgomery County’s economy is lost in much of the strategy and investment planning the county does to promote a strong economy.

“In fact, MCEDC offers this comment in its 2022 strategic plan adopted by the County Council: While this plan identifies critically important goals to strengthen Montgomery County’s economy and create new opportunities for residents and businesses, it is not designed to be exhaustive. **An industry sector that is not expressly referenced does not mean it has lesser significance or priority. For example, the travel and tourism industry is an important local sector but is not highlighted in the plan because the separate parallel activities and programs tied to it are more focused and comprehensive in nature.** The same applies to other important sectors such as restaurants, retail, and the service industry, which complete a full 360-degree view of the county’s economy.”

It is not clear at all what the MCEDC means when it says that the tourism and travel industry was not included in its plan because “the separate parallel activities and programs tied to it are more focused and comprehensive in nature.” What is clear is that much of the focus of the plan is on attracting major biotech firms, research institutions, and government offices and retaining jobs in these sectors. Yet, long before these sectors became a mainstay of the economy in Montgomery County, agriculture and tourism built around the open areas of the Agricultural Reserve were—and continue to be—a strong and important presence.

To be fair, there are recommendations and programs in the plan focused on helping promote strong small businesses, and since small, locally owned, and often family-owned businesses are the backbone of Western Montgomery County, this will help. But leaving out strategies focused on how to promote more visits and tourism to the many attractions in Western Montgomery County as part of the MCEDC strategic plan implies our economy is not a priority.

Visit Montgomery, the tourism promotion organization for the county, does have active programs to promote travel and visits to Montgomery County. Recently, the Fair Access Committee and the Town of Poolesville actively reached out to the organization to inform them of the many events the town and other local groups hold each year. While they were aware of some, it is fair to say a number were not on their radar. They also acknowledge they do not have much data on the economic benefits of tourism in Western Montgomery County. Without such data, it is difficult to see how well strategic planning to promote tourism in Western Montgomery County can be undertaken.

Fortunately, a number of organizations have taken an independent look at various topics that shine a light on the agricultural or tourism economy of the Agricultural Reserve and Western Montgomery County. Together, these reports suggest that the total value of all of the tourism-related activity and the shopping and patronage of the many historical sites, restaurants, and fruit and vegetable stores in Western Montgomery County generates far more economic activity than is likely recognized. Again, this is not to belittle agriculture because it was at the heart of the founding of the Agricultural Reserve and remains an important underpinning of its economic strength.

As both the original 1964 Wedges and Corridors General Plan and the Thrive 2050 master plan point out, though, the vitality of the Agricultural Reserve’s economy must include not only agriculture but also tourism-related activities of many kinds. The reports outlined below, while not comprehensive, provide some idea of the scope of the benefits to the local economy in Western Montgomery County through tourism.



## THE ECONOMIC EVIDENCE SUPPORTING THE “HUB AND SPOKE” MODEL

In the **Heritage Montgomery Economic Impact Study**, the non-profit Heritage Montgomery, a destination development organization for historic, cultural, and natural resources in Montgomery County, prepared an assessment of the overall economic impacts of visitors who come to see the county’s diverse historic sites, homes, trails, parks, and hiking sites. It found that the economic impact of just the promotional and grant-making activities of Heritage Montgomery totaled **\$376.1 million annually**. More than **\$50 million** was generated in state and local taxes, and all of this activity supported some **5,300 jobs**.

While not all of the economic activity in the report was driven by historic or outdoor sites located in Western Montgomery County, it should be noted that a substantial share of the sites included in the report is in the Agricultural Reserve. Because the policies underlying the Agricultural Reserve prohibit major development, it tends to preserve many historic sites, and a great many of the outdoor venues in the county are located in the Agricultural Reserve as well.

Another study recently looked at the growth of wineries and breweries in Montgomery County. The study, **The Status of Farm Alcohol Production in Montgomery County**, was an outgrowth of the decision in 2018 by the County Council to establish conditions under which alcohol can be produced and associated events can take place as an accessory used to farming in the Agricultural Reserve. The study found that between 2018 and 2019, the total number of licensed breweries in the Agricultural Reserve went from three to four (Landmade, the newest brewery, opened right outside the Town of Poolesville), and licensed wineries grew from two to four (Windridge is one of those wineries which opened just south of the Town of Poolesville on Route 28), the number of full-time jobs in those businesses nearly doubled to 50, and the number of visitors skyrocketed from approximately 2,000 to 28,000.

A third study looked at the impact of food production on the diets of residents of the DMV and their access to fresh food. Fruit and vegetable farms, such as Lewis’s Orchard, Kingsbury’s Orchard, Rockland Farms, Savage’s Farm, Deer Valley Farm, Homestead Farm, One Acre Farm, and many others, grow a variety of fruits and vegetables that come straight out of the gardens to be purchased by visitors. In the study, **What Our Region Grows to Eat and Drink**, National Capital Farms.org reported that 53 percent of American adults seek out locally grown or locally produced foods, with almost half of the survey respondents stating they were willing to pay 10 percent more for these foods. Many consumers perceive local food as fresher, healthier, and better tasting. In addition, consumers want to know their farmers and support local businesses.

In the Washington Ag Region, the report noted, there continues to be demand for locally grown food. The region’s high median household income, in part, has helped fuel demand, as people are able to spend more on products they perceive as superior.



## THE ECONOMIC EVIDENCE SUPPORTING THE “HUB AND SPOKE” MODEL

### THE REPORT FOUND THAT:

“...Direct-to-consumer sales and direct farm sales have grown (in the DMV). Between 2002 and 2012, there was a 25 percent increase in the number of farms involved in direct-to-consumer sales and a 137 percent increase in direct-to-consumer sales. Similarly, in 2015 Maryland and Virginia contributed \$84 million and \$217 million, respectively, in direct farm sales. **Local agriculture is not just a feel-good marketing strategy. It benefits both the farmers and the local economy. Buying local food allows farmers to keep more of the retail food dollar and creates benefits through the multiplier effect. The baseline multiplier for buying locally is 1.4 to 2.6, depending on the locale and commodity. The larger the multiplier, the more a dollar circulates in a region and can create more income, wealth, and jobs.**”

This last point regarding economic multipliers is very important when it comes to tourism in Western Montgomery County. In economics, a multiplier refers to the tendency for a dollar to “pass through many hands” as it goes through the economy. For example, a fruit and vegetable farm not only takes in revenue from visitors, it then pays its employees, purchases fertilizer to put on its plants, fuel for its tractors, and containers to store and transport its vegetables and fruits. The employees will spend money on the local economy.

Indirect economic impacts also occur due to tourism. For example, a tourist may plan to take an all-day hike at Sugarloaf Mountain. On the way there, they may purchase food and fuel in the Town of Poolesville or Dickerson. At the end of the day, they may decide to dine at a local restaurant. This, too, is an example of a multiplier effect, a common feature of tourism.

Travel and tourism, according to some studies, create almost 11 percent of the total available jobs worldwide in both the direct and indirect tourism sectors. Studies in Montgomery County suggest the total impact of tourism in the county is nearly \$2.5 billion. A significant portion of this figure relates to the economic value of overnight stays, especially hotel rentals, so it does not consider the sorts of activities noted earlier. In fact, the total may be higher, given the lack of solid data on many aspects of the Western Montgomery County economy.

In sum, tourism is a vital part of the Montgomery County economy. Given this fact and the supporting data we have found in this report, and the fact that the county’s economy is not growing as fast as some of its rivals in the DMV, it is even more important than ever that more data and solid information about tourism in Western Montgomery County be developed. Using this data, a sustained focus on tourism and attracting visitors to Western Montgomery County and the Agricultural Reserve and more supportive policies of this industry should be developed by the county and other organizations that are actively engaged in this issue.





## THE UNIQUE ROLE OF WHITE'S FERRY



One especially unique aspect of the economy of Western Montgomery County is the role of White's Ferry. The ferry has been closed for more than two years due to a contract dispute between two parties. The fact that the ferry is privately owned should not blind us to the fact that it is a vital public service. If any other critical transportation link in the county or state was suddenly blocked by some sort of contract disagreement, none of us would tolerate such a long closure.

The ferry is a transportation mode that has worked for our region for 240 years. It is a direct and vital commuter connection between two of the most traveled counties in the region, both of which have extensive high-tech sectors and jobs.

The ferry's unique characteristics help preserve the rural landscape on both sides of the river, in particular, helping the Agricultural Reserve in Western Montgomery County to thrive. It allows traffic to flow while effectively metering it so it does not overwhelm the rural roads and towns of the area. It is vital to the economy of Western Montgomery County and the Town of Poolesville, but it is also an important part of the cultural and historical legacy of the area. It is a reminder of the past that is still a vital part of today.

## THE UNIQUE ROLE OF WHITE'S FERRY



The Town of Poolesville is at the center of the Agricultural Reserve and by far the most affected jurisdiction. Ferry traffic runs right through the town on its central avenue. The economic and social impacts on the Town of Poolesville and on those living on both sides of the rural expanse around the ferry due to its closure is substantial. The Town of Poolesville has two main roads that travel to or by it – Route 107 or White’s Ferry Road and Route 28. Route 28 is a main north-south commuter road and lies a couple of miles to the east of the Town of Poolesville. Commuters or visitors who do not have a reason to go to the Town of Poolesville to shop, visit local attractions, historical sites, or farm stores, or commute simply drive right by our town. White’s Ferry Road is the main street for the town and attracts commuters, students, and weekend visitors who either visit or drive through to get to Virginia. As they do, they often stop and shop, eat, and purchase items from local stores.

The spur-of-the-moment stops in the Town of Poolesville that occur as drivers to and from the ferry go through town are vital to the local business community. Without the ferry, the Town of Poolesville’s economy has suffered, forcing residents to commute two or more hours to get to their jobs. For people looking to purchase a home in the Town of Poolesville, this is a big factor in the decision-making process. Some have chosen not to settle in the town because of the ferry situation. Businesses have lost traffic — in some cases, up to 20 percent. The owners of the four commercial malls in town say that the ferry’s closure is the biggest impediment they face in attracting new tenants.

The impacts of the ferry’s closure are larger on the Town of Poolesville than the number of car crossings per day (800 or so) might suggest. Citizens are ten miles from the nearest grocery store, more than 15 miles from many medical specialists, and ten or more miles from community centers, clinics, or senior centers. Due to the small, spread-out population of the Agricultural Reserve, the local economy is based mostly on small, often locally or family-owned businesses. They cannot easily handle what might seem to some to be small reductions in car traffic. To the town, the shutdown has been an economic ball and chain.

Based on data in the 2021 Joint Study on White’s Ferry, the total number of excess mileage driven between the Town of Poolesville and Leesburg and back amounts to about 9 million miles, a waste of fuel and environmentally damaging. The study also shows the economic impact of reopening the ferry on factors such as fewer miles driven, reduced lost work time, and money paid to ferry employees and invested in ferry operations (leaving out things like the impacts of more visits to stores and restaurants) could add up to \$24 million over the next decade.

The total economic impacts of lost tourism to both Loudoun County and Montgomery County have nowhere been calculated, but the 2021 ferry study found heavy traffic on the weekends coming from Virginia to Maryland to visit the C&O Canal, Sugarloaf Mountain, historical sites, wineries, and breweries. These visits are almost certainly less frequent or less spur of the moment than they once were.





## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Western Montgomery County includes a number of small towns and communities, including Barnesville, Dickerson, Boyds, and Beallsville. At its heart is the Town of Poolesville, by far the largest jurisdiction and the location of the largest number of local businesses, including restaurants, hardware and farm stores, gift shops, and auto repair shops. It is also the site of the county's outdoor swimming pool (the Sarah E. Auer Memorial Pool), three of the four cluster schools, including Poolesville High School, John Poole Middle School, and Poolesville Elementary, a green space in the center of town (Whelan Commons) where many events are held, parks of many kinds including a skate park, and miles of pathways and sidewalks. **With all of these resources, the Town of Poolesville serves as the vital “hub” for Western Montgomery County’s many “spokes,” and the county should treat it as an equal partner in promoting and adopting policies and programs to enhance the economy of the area.**
- The “hub” of the Town of Poolesville can help support more visitors to Western Montgomery County by ensuring that the town has the facilities and programs that other areas in the county enjoy that not only attract visitors (i.e., a year-round swimming pool) but helps improve life for all residents of Western Montgomery County. The county has moved to reconstruct Poolesville High School, so it will be transformed into a 21st-century center for learning, sports, and student art programs. Other needed improvements include:
  - A new community center that includes clinic space to provide needed health care services where Western Montgomery County residents live and supply facilities and equipment to provide a range of opportunities for our youth and the elderly, including mentoring programs, after-school programs, exercise and fitness programs, gym space for sports of all kinds for young and old, and a “safe space” for kids to unwind and socialize; and
  - Enclosing the swimming pool so it becomes a year-round facility that can hold competitions and events, practices, provide recreational opportunities, and help those who are recovering from injuries or are aging to improve their health.
- Continue making improvements in the “spokes” in Western Montgomery County, like the soon-to-be-opened Crossvines grape crushing facility, restaurant, and events venue, including:
  - Reopening White’s Ferry now and investing in needed capital improvements as outlined in the November 2021 report on the ferry so that it can handle more traffic and operate more efficiently;
  - Devote more resources and effort via Visit Montgomery to identify opportunities to attract more visitors, look for ways to enhance the tourist experience in Western Montgomery County (i.e., through some form of BnB or small motel for overnight stays), and partner actively and intensively with groups in Western Montgomery County to better promote and highlight the tourist opportunities in the area. The many African American historical sites should be a special focus of such efforts;
  - Look for opportunities to promote more locations in the “spokes” around the Town of Poolesville, including the possibility of building a museum devoted to the history of ferries at White’s Ferry. The National Park Service is in the midst of developing a major master plan that would include improvements to make the 67 acres of parkland around the ferry a new destination for visitors. Now is the time to consider the idea of building such a museum in addition to the campground enhancements already being considered; and
  - Studies and research need to be done to substantially improve our understanding of how to enhance the economic vitality of Western Montgomery County. Work also needs to be done to significantly improve and expand efforts to promote and attract visitors to Western Montgomery County. Finally, all of this work should be put to use by developing a robust strategy and policy framework that will drive future improvements. These efforts will take resources, but the payback both to economic growth and the lives of Western Montgomery County residents can be substantial.



## ARTS AND PERFORMING ARTS CENTER



The White Paper includes support for constructing a Performing Arts Center with Gallery Space in Poolesville. It is the vision of Sandy Wright and David Therriault, the founders of Riverworks Art Center. Established in 2022, Riverworks is making Poolesville and Western Montgomery County a hub for art classes, performances, exhibitions, and cultural programs. It is unique among art centers in the D.C. region for its restorative rural setting within Montgomery County's 93,000 Agricultural Reserve.

### Riverworks currently hosts events at three venues in and around Poolesville:

- With its elegant sculpture garden, Alden Farms (19215 Beallsville Road, Beallsville, Md.) provides a quiet space for art classes, writing workshops, and studio space.
- At Locals Farm Market (19929 Fisher Ave., Poolesville, Md.), you'll find rotating art exhibitions, Friday night jam sessions, and a marketplace for the work of local artists.
- The outdoor stage at the historic Methodist church (17617 West Willard Road, Poolesville, Md.) brings dance, music, and other performances to the heart of our small town, with bigger plans to come.



## ARTS AND PERFORMING ARTS CENTER

Riverworks is turning the historic 1820s church on West Willard Road into a performing arts center and gallery space. Built in 1826, the old Methodist church in Poolesville has served many functions: as a telegraph office for the Union Army during the Civil War, a YMCA, a movie theater, a nursery school, a pharmacy, a veterinarian's office, a temporary town hall, and most recently, a thrift shop.

As the centerpiece of Riverworks and the organization's most visible building, this historic church will serve as an intimate performance space for an audience of approximately 150, including seating on the restored church balcony. Complementing its custom-designed sound system and an interior beautified by locally milled wood, the site will feature a unique, interchangeable stage, allowing performers to face indoor and outdoor audiences.

With plans drawn, permits soon to come, and committed state and local funding, Riverworks has begun the exciting, multi-year process of turning this historic structure into a state-of-the-art performing arts center. By preserving a historic building in the heart of town, Riverworks is breathing new life into a beloved landmark long in need of restoration. In years to come, Riverworks hopes to host classes and open studios in other commercial and historic buildings in other walkable Poolesville locations.

The Riverworks vision is art and culture for all—while transforming small-town Poolesville and Western Montgomery County into an arts destination for visitors from the D.C. region and beyond, helping to promote the preservation of the Agricultural Reserve and economy vitality.



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## APPENDIX

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Additional Heritage Montgomery Assets in the Area:

### HISTORIC SITES

- Button Farm
- C&O Canal Quarters and Lockhouses
- Rustic Roads and Scenic Byways
- Black Rock
- Woodstock Equestrian Park
- Civil War Trail
- Native American Trail
- Sugarloaf Trails
- Linden Farm
- Poolesville National Historic District
- Seneca Historic District
- Dickerson Historic District

### OUTDOOR

- National, State and County Parks Sites and Trails
- Potomac River
- Dickerson Conservation Park
- Countryside Artisans

